

West Bengal's Left Front regime suppresses protests against land seizures

Kranti Kumara
12 December 2006

Nothing better illustrates the relentless rightward thrust of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] than the pro-investor economic policies that West Bengal's CPM-led Left Front government is implementing with the support of the police and courts.

Recent months have seen a growing popular agitation against the West Bengal government's seizure of 1,000 acres, most of it prime agricultural land, near the town of Singur, which lies in Hoogly district, not far from the state capital Kolkata (Calcutta). The land is to be sold—reportedly at a bargain price—to the Indian multinational Tata Motors so that it can build a car-assembly plant.

Tata's state-supported expropriation threatens the small farmers, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers who have hitherto worked the land with ruin.

While the Left Front claims to be offering a generous compensation package, much if not most of the compensation will go to the land's legal owners, most of whom are absentee landlords.

None of the people whose livelihood is being pitilessly destroyed were in anyway consulted whether they wished to part with the land they till for their survival for the benefit of Tata Motors. Any compensation they receive will be in the form of cash, not land.

West Bengal's Stalinist-led government has responded to the anti-land seizure protest campaign, which has included petitions, demonstrations, strikes, and sits-ins, with derisory propaganda and by unleashing violent state repression.

Police have attacked demonstrators, lobbed tear-gas at them, broken into and ransacked their dwellings, and taken protesters, including young girls, into custody. Meanwhile, state authorities have fenced in the area to be given over to Tata.

Repeating the standard refrain of the right, the Left Front government has blamed the protest campaign on outsiders. To prevent the agitation from garnering national support, the government has placed Singur and its environs under a prohibitory order. Opposition politicians and well-known activists have been “banned” from visiting the area.

Medha Petkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)—a movement that originated in opposition to the violent confiscation of tribal lands by state and central governments to build dams across the Narmada River—was banned from entering Singur and arrested on December 9 for demonstrating in front of the US consulate “without permission.”

CPM Politburo member and West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee is playing the role of chief advocate for the Tata development project, saying that his government will not allow any disruption of its plans to industrialise West Bengal by securing massive investments from Indian and foreign capitalist anxious to take advantage of the state's large reserves of cheap labour.

“Without industry and commerce there can be no progress,” Bhattacharjee told a rally called by the CPM-aligned Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) December 3. Referring to the Singur protests, the Stalinist Chief Minister said “some outsiders” were “stirring unrest,” then justified the police action against them: “The police cannot sit still, but neither do they attack unless attacked.”

The Stalinists have sought to portray the opposition to the land expropriation as “anti-development,” although most of the opponents are simply calling for the Tata plant to be relocated so as not to use prime agricultural land. The Stalinists also are seeking to exploit the fact that the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP) has sought to use the Singur issue to attack the Left Front in order to tar the opposition to the expropriation as right-wing.

The ruthless manner in which the Left Front is pushing through the Singur project is clearly meant as a demonstration to Indian and international capital that they can have every confidence that Bhattacharjee means what he says when he proclaims the building of capitalism and wooing of investors to be his government's principal goals and the only realistic goals for "socialists" for the foreseeable future.

The West Bengal government has used the British-era Land Acquisition Act of 1894 to seize the land in villages in and around Singur on Tata's behalf.

The Singur land expropriation is of national importance because ownership and control of land remains and will become, as the bourgeoisie presses forward with its plans for the capitalist development of the subcontinent, even more of a burning political issue. Some 60 percent of India's population depends on agriculture for its survival.

All across India, governments are moving to confiscate land and hand it over to big business in the form of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), where normal labour and environmental regulations and tax policies do not apply. In the coming period, hundreds of thousands of tribal people, peasants, sharecroppers and other small villagers could be driven from the land like the people of Singur.

The Stalinist-led Left Front is calling for India's coalition government—the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance—to review the rules governing the SEZs. But it provided the UPA with support in passing this pro-big business legislation in May 2005 and continues to provide the UPA with the parliamentary support that guarantees its survival. (See "India's policy on Special Economic Zones under fire")

Hoping to prod the Stalinists to move even further right, the corporate media has called on the CPM and its Left Front allies to be as forthright in implementing the neo-liberal agenda of the bourgeoisies at the national level as they are in West Bengal.

The Stalinists' emergence as expropriators for the Tata empire has provided the right-wing state opposition party, the Trinamool Congress, with an opening to posture as a defender of the people's interests. Its leader, Mamata Banerjee, began an

indefinite hunger strike on Dec. 4 in protest over the police repression in Singur.

In this posturing, Banerjee has been joined by her long-time ally, the Hindu-supremacist BJP. BJP President Rajnath Singh met with Mamata Banerjee and assured her, "You are not alone. Whether in Parliament or on the streets, the BJP is with you."

When the BJP led India's government, from 1998 to May 2004, it pursued investor-friendly and anti-working class policies no different from the current UPA government's.

Of late, the Congress Party has been pursuing closer relations with Mamata Banerjee as a means of warning the Left Front not to be too disruptive of the UPA government's agenda. But it has disassociated itself from Banerjee's increasingly vitriolic campaign, which, as the Stalinists have pointed out, threatens to tarnish West Bengal's image among investors. Declared West Bengal Congress Party Working Committee president Pradip Bhattacharya; "There is no question of [our] being part of a campaign which involves the BJP; we shall register our protest separately."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact